

# The Postman Delivers

*Mark Hensby has fulfilled his ambition to make it on the toughest stage in the world. Bruce Young caught up with the New South Welshman, who says he's looking forward to having an impact on this year's Australasian Tour.*

**R**iding his bike delivering mail to residents of Tamworth in country New South Wales, Australian golfer Mark Hensby would often think about the possibility of playing the game professionally in the US. "It was always my main goal to get to the US and play as a professional there," he says.

"While many thought the better option was to go to Europe, I wanted to go to the most difficult arena straight away. Obviously I knew delivering mail in Tamworth was not what I was going to do forever. I always had the ambition, even earlier, at the age of 15 or 16, that playing the game for a living was what I wanted to do."

Hensby had arrived in Tamworth from Melbourne at the age of eight with his family and after leaving school worked at several jobs including washing dishes at night, working in the pro shop at Tamworth Golf Club and working on the ground staff at golf courses in the area. By the time he was 15 he was playing off scratch but being

from country New South Wales it wasn't all that easy to make his mark in NSW amateur golf and so he looked ahead to the possibility of a life in professional golf.

In 1993 at the age of 22, Hensby left for the US and headed for Chicago where he had family friends from Australia. He quickly established himself in amateur golf circles in Illinois, winning the Illinois State Amateur in 1994.

"I played a lot of amateur events on arriving in Illinois and really felt that my game was more suited to the US than anywhere else. I hit the ball quite high and although the game here has changed somewhat since then, it was more a case of target golf at that stage and I felt suited to it."

Much has been made of Hensby sleeping in the back of his car at Cog Hill Golf Club at about that time, a story that has grown further legs as his status in the game has grown.

"It keeps getting overblown. I got stuck when the people I was living with left to go back to Australia and there was the occasional night when

I slept in the car but I also stayed in the clubhouse and other people helped."

On turning professional in 1995, the first event Hensby won was the 1996 Illinois Open, which he won by eight shots. From there he joined the then Nike Tour in 1997 and in 1998 won the Fort Smith Classic where he beat Woody Austin by two shots. Despite that win, he did not earn enough money that season to get to gain his card on the US PGA Tour. That would eventually come in 2001 after a brilliant Buy.com Tour season in 2000, when he finished second on the money list. In his very first start as a card holder on the US PGA Tour he finished 9th at the Tuscon Open but from that point on, 2001 was not good to him.

"I was thrown in at the deep end a little that year and perhaps my expectations were too high. I've learned that you can't place high expectations on yourself but rather you just have to go out there and do your best and see what happens. It wasn't so much that I didn't play well that year but more that I really didn't

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enjoy the experience all that much. The PGA Tour is a very different beast.”

He headed back to the secondary tour and played well in 2002, although an injury in the middle of that year meant he finished outside the top-15 on the money list, which would earn automatic graduation to the US PGA Tour. He headed to the Tour School later in 2002 and missed his card by an agonising one shot, but headed back to the renamed Nationwide Tour in 2003 and had great success winning once and finishing second twice to regain his US PGA Tour card for 2004. With the two extra years behind him between US PGA Tour campaigns, Hensby was determined to do things differently this time.

“I decided to do things my way

and not worry about what anybody else thought and with that attitude and the extra time for my game to mature, things began to go well.”

He had top-10 finishes at Pebble Beach and Tuscon before finishing second to Zach Johnson at the Bell South. Another top three finish soon followed at the Western Open at that same Cog Hill Golf Club near Chicago, a region and golf course that obviously provided many fond memories of his early times in the US.

It would be the very next week though, at the John Deere Classic, also in Illinois, that would provide perhaps his biggest thrill in golf to that point — although he kept it in perspective. He won that event in a playoff over John. E. Morgan. “Obviously to win on the PGA Tour

was my dream but honestly it didn't really feel all that different from my wins on the Nationwide Tour and majors are really my main goal.”

That win earned a start at the Open Championship at Royal Troon the next week but, to the surprise of some, Hensby turned down that opportunity.

“I copped some criticism from various quarters. The Golf Channel over here gave me a hard time but, as is often the case people were making judgements without a full understanding of the reasons for my decision. I didn't have my passport with me at the time and I could not have gotten there till the Wednesday and on that basis it would have been a waste of time. Even today people still ask me if I wish I had gone and I still say no. Even this year at the

British Open, because of wanting to do the right thing and defend the John Deere Classic title, I was a little short on preparation time at St Andrews and it showed as although I made a great start with 67, I had 77 in round two, so it caught up with me. I would have been even less prepared last year.”

Hensby completed the year in 2004 having earned US\$2.7 million. It's fair to say that it would have taken a lot of overtime delivering mail in Tamworth to even contemplate that amount of money.

At the end of 2004 he again came under scrutiny this time for not playing the Australian Open. Hensby admits it was a case of misunderstanding rather than not wanting to.

“I did not receive an invite and had no contact from the AGU [Australian Golf Union] despite having won on the US PGA Tour, although I subsequently found out that by being in the top-100 in the world I automatically had a start

at the Australian Open. By then I had made a commitment to play in Korea. The thing is though, that I was never offered an invite to play the Australian Open or other events when I was having reasonable years on the Nationwide Tour and now because I had a good year and won on the US PGA Tour there was almost an expectation of me to play.

of his achievements in 2004 he was now eligible to play in all four majors this year. The first of those was at Augusta and as most will testify playing Augusta and The Masters for the first time can be a daunting experience. Not so Hensby. He had not played all that well leading into the event but has his own views on that. “The major championships are

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The major championships are not only about how you are playing, a lot of it is mindset — Hensby

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It should not work that way and the tournament organisers there would be well advised to keep an eye on the guys who are playing well on either tour over here.”

Hensby made a relatively slow start to the 2005 season but because

not only about how you are playing, a lot of it is mindset. You need a lot of patience and in fact I had played well in practice the week before. I worked out with Vijay [Singh] a lot at his house in Florida where has installed a green which runs at the

Hensby has his sights set on the upcoming Australasian season



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speed of those at Augusta. Just being around Vijay leading into the event and in a practice round with him at Augusta was a great help.”

Hensby and Singh are good friends and he also enjoys a good friendship with Tiger Woods .

Throughout the Masters and at subsequent majors in 2005, as Hensby entered the spotlight and was often interviewed by the media, he typically downplayed the importance of the event to ensure he kept things in perspective.

“The majors are important, obviously, but I try to treat them as just another event and I think that policy works. I downplay all events and keep things in their right perspective. I made sure I was prepared for them also.” Hensby finished fifth at Augusta, in a stunning debut.

Just two months later at Pinehurst he would make yet

another brilliant debut, this time in the US Open when he finished third behind Michael Campbell.

“My short game was in great shape that week, which it needed to be as I didn’t hit a lot of fairways but to be fair the fairways were only 22 yards wide or so, so many of my misses were not all that bad. Perhaps more than any other event that is one where I really feel if I had been playing only a little better I could have won there. I don’t normally look back in hindsight but what it did show to me was that I have what it takes to one day win a major.”

Hensby headed to St Andrews for yet another major debut, in fact his first event in Europe and opened with 67 where he trailed only Tiger Woods. He eventually finished 15th at the Open Championship, which all things considered was very good.

After the Open Championship Hensby headed for Hockenheim in Germany where he enjoyed one of his passions at the German Grand Prix.

“I’m really into Formula One and it was probably one of the best weeks I have had in my life.”

From there and in a relaxed and refreshed state of mind, it was to yet another great week in Sweden where Hensby would play in his very first European Tour event outside of the majors, the Scandinavian Masters. It was a week where he would team for the first time with Fanny Sunneson who had previously caddied for Nick Faldo.

“It was a treat to have her on the bag,” Hensby says . “I don’t think I’ve met a more professional person in my life and we will team up again at the World Match Play Championship at Wentworth. She cracked me up as we walked back to the first playoff hole against Henrik Stenson there in Sweden when she said that I was either going to make one Swede very happy or a lot of Swedes very unhappy.”



It would be the former as he outlasted Stenson in the playoff.

Hensby now has a big finish to the year in store. His exploits in 2005 have assured him of a place on the International Team for the Presidents Cup and his major championship performances have earned him a start at the HSBC World Match Play Championship at Wentworth.

Importantly however, is that Mark Hensby will get to play in front of his home crowds for the first time since he’s taken his game to level, when he plays both the Australian Open and the Australian PGA in the next couple of months.

“I’m looking forward to getting down and playing there and I am keen to do well. I will be coming down a little early to prepare myself as I don’t want to be just going through the motions.”

The cloud of mystery that has covered Mark Hensby is about to be lifted for Australian golf fans. This very much self-made man and golfer, who possesses a strong belief in his own way of doing things, has taught us all that the road less travelled in professional golf can also be a successful one. ☺

Right: Hensby takes a relaxed approach into every tournament.

Below: Hensby with his trophy for winning the recent Scandinavian Masters.



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